

Techniques for taming feral cats and kittens

The following are some tried and true techniques for taming feral cats and kittens. Be aware that every feral is different and not all can be tamed. Some cats will tame even as adults but you will be most successful with kittens under ten weeks of age. Our experience has been that we can tame almost all cats under 10 weeks of age. From 10-12 weeks, that number goes down to 50-75%. Beyond that, we can tame maybe a third, and they may retain some feral characteristics for life.

You may find that the ones who are the most hostile and aggressive initially will be easier to tame than the shy ones. The aggression seems to be a form of extroversion, and to indicate a greater willingness to accept new things. SNA (scared, not aggressive) cats, especially adults, frequently do not tame. They may make small progress over time, but rarely become fit to be a companion animal. These cats will always be happier with a farm home (or other living situation) where they don't have direct contact with humans. In short, the cat at the front of the cage swiping at you and hissing may become your best friend one day, but the one who is cowering in the back of the cage rarely will.

Live by these rules and try the additional techniques, but don't spend more than a month or so working with any one cat. Part of doing what's best for feral cats is knowing when to stop and to give them what they want- a rural home where the humans give them the space they need to feel safe and comfortable.

*Note- For ease of composition the animals under discussion will be referred to as "he" or "him" (when not referred to as "them") for the remainder of the document, although the cat is just as likely to be female as male.

Rule #1

- Never chase a feral. Chasing a feral will make him feel like you are predator and he is your prey. This will set you back in a major way.

Rule #2

- Cage the cat. By caging him, you ensure that he has a nest where he feels safe and where you can interact with him easily without having to chase him. (See Rule #1)

Rule #3

- Feed the animal by hand/spoon only. Two or three feedings a day is enough and don't leave food in the cage! (Do leave water, of course.) It may feel cruel withholding food, but think of it as tough love and don't worry- the cat won't starve. The cat may reject food for a day, but will rarely hold out longer than that. Hand feeding will make him associate you with all things good and look forward to your visits, but first he needs to be hungry enough to take food from you.

- If the cat is a biter, feed him with a spoon. Wear leather gloves if necessary to avoid bites. Any canned food will do. Chicken and turkey Gerber's baby food are especially tempting (not ham - as it has other ingredients which are bad for cats.)
- If the cat rejects the food, try putting a gob on his nose. The cat will lick that off- once he gets a taste he will almost always eat
- If, after 5 minutes or so, he still won't take food from you, leave the spoon in the cage with the food on it, but don't give up and put the bowl in the cage. Simply visit more frequently. The cat may only eat a spoonful every hour, but that will add up.
- Once you trust the cat not to bite you, feed directly from your hand. Once the animal is comfortable with this, try stroking his head with your stinky, food-covered fingers. This helps him get over the fear of a hand reaching for him. Reach with a relaxed fist, not an open hand. Open hands are intimidating and look like grabbing, but cats don't associate closed fists with punching like a human might.
- If you do not see a noticeable change in tameness after a week of hand-feeding it's time to send the cat to an outdoor home. Remember: Sometimes hand-feeding is enough to turn them into non-biters, but not enough to make them tame.

Rule #4

- Forcing the animal to interact with you is a good thing! Some people are reluctant to "force themselves" on a cat. They are missing out on a very valuable taming tool. Often the cat doesn't know that it feels good to be petted until you hold him and stroke him. Keep it up until he relaxes and begin to enjoy the contact. Of course, you don't want to chase the cat down (See Rule # 2), or grab him aggressively. Which leads to...

Rule #5

- Scruff the cat. Scruffing is the safest way to pick up a feral cat or kitten. Some people are uncomfortable with scruffing, but you must get comfortable with it if you want to foster cats in general and ferals specifically. Cats don't mind being scruffed and in fact feel safer being handled this way.
- Most kittens will relax when scruffed. This prevents them from scratching you, and from hooking their claws into things as you pull them from the cage- which can cause injury.

Rule #6

- Push the animal's boundaries a bit. Well-paced changes are good for them. A change in foster for instance can help an animal learn to accept new people. Taking the cat to an adoption fair (even if you leave that cat in its carrier) can help him to realize that while the outing was scary nothing bad happened. (Note: Don't take an aggressive cat to an adoption fair, and if at all possible stay at the fair with your foster.)

Other Techniques To Try

- 1) Wrap the cat in a blanket, head covered (so you don't get bitten and he feels safer), and hold him while watching TV or reading. Hint: after half an hour or so the ones that will never tame start hyperventilating. The tameable ones will relax. You can also try kangaroo care- carry them in a baby sling or tucked under a sweatshirt
- 2) Get your fingers damp and slowly stroke his head. It feels like mom licking him, and often leads to purrs
- 3) Blink slowly like a cat sunning itself and sigh deeply. Think zen thoughts. Cats feel more relaxed if you feel more relaxed and often blink in response.
- 4) If you are working with a group of cats, separate them. If they don't have each other to turn to for attention, they are more likely to turn to you.
- 5) Some feral kittens love friendly adult cats. Bring in your own cat and see if they purr for him/her. The warm fuzzy feelings will extend to you and make them more receptive to attention. Don't give them access to the cat at all times. You want this to be a special treat that happens only when you are there. Again, they need to see that good things happen only when you visit them. If you have separated the littermates, you can also try allowing supervised visits as a treat.
- 6) Try play therapy. Many ferals don't play initially. All of their energies have previously been expended in self preservation and they've not learned to enjoy the small things in life- like pieces of string and glitter balls. Some ferals that are not food-motivated may be tempted by dangling strings and will bond with you over play. Usually non-noisy toys like feathers and string are better than bells and rattles.

Remember that not all feral cats can be tamed. Don't look at non-tamables as failures on your part or think of them as cats that are "mean"! These cats will be perfectly fine on farms or in other homes where they can be adequately fed and housed but have only limited interaction with human beings. They can have healthy happy lives without being pets and are pleased to earn their keep as mousers.